

it, and thus able to influence government policy. The logic of what sounded like a policy of appeasement was not well received by those who heard it.

Apart from its tobacco control policy, or lack of it, Germany is in many ways a model European country that deserves to be celebrated for its contribution to the present, not the past. If only the government could break its disastrous addiction to Big Tobacco (see also *Tobacco Control* 2002;11:291-3).

Finland: floating loopholes

Delegates to the world conference on tobacco in Helsinki were reminded throughout the meeting what a strong leadership role Finland has played in tobacco control. On the way to achieving one of the world's fastest declines in lung cancer mortality among middle aged men, it was one of the first countries to ban all forms of tobacco promotion.

But admiring visitors did not have to go far to be reminded that wherever there is the slightest loophole, the slime of tobacco advertising will ooze out. One delegate took a post-conference trip across the Baltic Sea to Stockholm, noting with satisfaction that Silja Line, the company operating the ferry, had received an award in the government backed "Golden Fork" scheme.

This is described as promoting non-smoking in hotels and restaurants, and is carried out "face to face" by the means of health education, and is a national quality project. Silja's own website proclaims that taking responsibility for the environment is an integral

aspect of its total quality management system. Not quite total enough, as the ship was full of multiple display racks of all varieties of tobacco, some just above child's eye height confectionery displays, as well as large, back-illuminated tobacco ads that dominated the duty free shop.

Silja says it strives to earn the respect of its customers and the general public by making a pioneering contribution in the sphere of environmental protection. In future, it may care to consider that the environment starts with its customers, and especially with their children.

Australia: reviewing the act, industry-style

It has long been accepted that every decent health improvement plan, from the humblest local education campaign right up to a comprehensive national tobacco control act, should end with a section on the need for constant monitoring and evaluation, followed up by adjustments to the policy if necessary. Few governments that survive the countless rounds in the heavyweight ring of anti-tobacco legislation seem to remember the bit about review, but not surprisingly, Australia is once again a model.

After just 10 years, the federal government is reviewing its Tobacco Prohibition Act. It might have been thought that tobacco companies, which are known to have more or less given up any idea of increasing business in Australia, might have the grace to keep quiet. But no—they may be dead, but they just won't lie down. For years they protested that their products were harmless; then less harmful than the doctors said; then, well, harmful, but isn't everything else? And now a variation on an old line: everyone knows it all anyway.

Mr John Galligan, director of corporate affairs for BAT (Australia), commenting recently on the government's review plans, said: "We would contend there is universal understanding of the risks of smoking. Government surveys show there is a 98 per cent understanding. How much more do you burden the industry to communicate something the public is already aware of?" So that's all right, then. No review needed, and certainly no tightening up of the act.

Naturally, the Australian government will give his contention all the attention it merits, all the way to the waste paper basket. In its review, it will want to examine the ways tobacco companies have been exploiting the new electronic media that has proved so effective for communicating with teenagers. The

government will also want to know about the companies' involvement with discos, fashion shows, and multi-product "niche marketing" schemes to get prime peer leaders to parties, sometimes clandestinely arranged only by telephone, with the lure of top musicians, and featuring cigarette handouts amid a galaxy of talent and glamour.

When tobacco executives make crass arguments like that, especially in a country that has made it amply clear it means business, who do they think they are fooling? Do they really believe some of it? And as for the unique scale of the epidemic their product causes, at times it is hard to avoid the question: do these people really not get it?

Latvia: window of opportunity

For once, it seems that one of the new democracies of the former Soviet Union may be able to avoid the worst of the enslavement to western tobacco companies that has happened to so many other countries in the same situation. Latvia, in fact, is actually quite an old democracy, having tasted independence and freedom in the early part of the 20th century, developing to have one of the highest standards of living anywhere in Europe in the 1930s. From 1940, it was occupied with extreme brutality first by the Soviet Union, then by Nazi Germany, and then again by the Soviets, whose pretence of allowing independence turned into forcible membership of the USSR. But eventually, in 1991, this small nation finally regained its independence. Nowadays it has around two and a half million people, including a sizeable Russian minority.

Sandwiched between Estonia and Lithuania, Latvians recently followed their Baltic neighbours by voting to join the European Union (EU). Membership of the EU, together with the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC), whose ratification is among the legislative priorities of the present government over the next year, may turn out to be key factors in saving Latvia from the worst of the trends so needlessly repeated in the other former Soviet states. Some 51% of men smoke daily, but only around 19% of women.

While the relatively low female smoking prevalence is to be welcomed, health officials know it offers an irresistible opportunity for foreign tobacco companies unless the current partial advertising ban is made total as a matter of urgency. Apart from a committed health minister, herself a gynaecologist, the infrastructure of tobacco control in Latvia also enjoys several other bonuses. The health ministry and



Cigarettes and children's confectionery on display together on board the Silja Line ferry from Helsinki to Stockholm.